

# **“An Evening with The Ambassadors”**

Andrew Martin

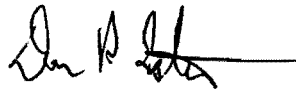
# **An Evening with The Ambassadors**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Dr. Don Ester

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don Ester", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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## Abstract

As a showcase for its top choral ensemble, Carmel High School's Performing Arts Department presents "An Evening with the Ambassadors" each year. This concert allows the members of the Ambassadors to display their talents in solo and choral singing and dance while developing vocal technique and performance skills. Intended as a resource for young or aspiring music teachers, this documentary film follows the process of the production of "An Evening with the Ambassadors." It brings to light many of the aspects of planning that go into such a concert and provides general advice from currently-practicing music educators to the next generation of educators.

## Acknowledgements

- I first want to thank Dr. Don Ester for providing me with much of the background knowledge that directed my observations throughout the production process.
- I also would like to thank Ann Conrad, Lamonte Kuskye, and the members of the 2005-2006 Ambassadors for allowing me access to the behind-the-scenes aspects of their show.

## **Artist's Statement**

As a showcase for its top choral ensemble, Carmel High School's Performing Arts Department presents "An Evening with The Ambassadors" each year. This concert allows the members of The Ambassadors to display their talents in solo and choral singing and dance while developing vocal technique and performance skills. Intended as a resource for young or aspiring music teachers, this documentary film follows the process of the production of "An Evening with The Ambassadors." It brings to light many of the aspects of planning, such as music selection, costuming, and staging, that go into such a concert and provides general advice from currently-practicing music educators to the next generation of teachers.

During the production of this film, I was able to fill several roles, as singular producer on the film itself, as assistant director for the event "An Evening with the Ambassadors," and as an observer of the planning, rehearsal, and performance process. As the film's producer, I was responsible for organizing and carrying out the shooting and editing process to prepare as professional a product as I could. Fortunately, thanks to previous training in these areas, I had the background knowledge necessary to plan ahead for the types of shots I might need for the video and keep track to make sure I was covering my bases. For instance, in order to provide first-hand advice from practicing teachers to new or aspiring ones, I knew I would need interview segments with the Carmel High School choral directors, choreographer, and anyone else I could get my hands on. Since concerts such as "An Evening with The Ambassadors" are ultimately about the students, I knew rehearsal shots would be absolutely critical to show the development of the students as the semester wore on. I also considered including student

interviews in the documentary, as it could have been valuable for future teachers to know how students might react to, for example, the sudden change in the theme of the show; but I eventually decided it was better to focus on the teachers themselves.

In serving as assistant director for “The Ambassadors” during this semester, I had a wonderful opportunity to work directly with the students and the teachers. As a young, and relatively inexperienced, teacher myself, it was the work with the students that was probably most valuable to me as a learning experience. The rehearsal pace was one of the more surprising elements of the whole process to me. Having been around ensembles similar to “The Ambassadors,” but ones that provided different performance opportunities to the students, I was used to rehearsals being extremely detail-oriented, with a lot of time spent in relatively small aspects of the performance. With this particular event, so much music, and choreography, must be learned that there is not time to dwell on one piece for too long. Instead, rehearsals move quickly and students are expected to take care of details on their own time. In attempting to integrate myself into those rehearsals, I had to alter my view of what was acceptable and realize that students indeed WOULD take their performance to the next level without having to be spoon-fed. Throughout this entire process, it was enlightening for me to gain a much better grasp of what high school students were capable of accomplishing.

As an observer of the production process, I was able to get a first-hand view of not only what decisions were made, but also why they were so. In changing the theme of the second act of the show, many things were taken into consideration. First and foremost was the educational integrity of the theme. The original theme, music of television, provided an opportunity for students to explore American pop culture.

However, from a music education standpoint, there was simply not enough good music to provide a truly valuable experience to the students. The directors also took the audience into account when making this decision. One of the primary goals of a show choir such as “The Ambassadors” is to entertain, and the television theme was leading the show down a path of medleys. The music that had been selected included a medley of classic television themes, another of jingles, and still another of more modern television music. As can be true with anything, a steady diet of medleys, it was decided, would bore the audience, therefore eliminating entertainment value. A change was then made to a New Orleans theme. This new theme gave the students a chance to experience New Orleans culture and history; jazz, riverboats, American folk songs, and more; through the music that they performed. This theme also allowed for a greater variety of music to be selected, improving the entertainment value of the show.

For this particular documentary, I chose to focus my observations on the more peripheral elements of the show’s production, rather than on the actual teaching of the music and dance. My rationale is that music education students are exposed to teaching methods for various types of ensembles in college methods courses and through field teaching experiences. What many students may not be exposed to, or only exposed to in a limited scope, are the administrative tasks and decision making processes that have to happen in order for a concert such as this, or any other, to ultimately be successful. Music teachers must consider publicity- how to get audience members to the performance, scheduling- how to work around students’ busy lives to get rehearsal time, the audience itself- what audience members want to see, and more. The task of producing a show like “An Evening with The Ambassadors” is daunting enough that I

could not possibly explore it in its entirety here or in one short documentary. Instead, I hope my work can help someone down the line to at least know where to begin if he or she decided to attempt to create a similar event.

The organization of the documentary is such that it is the teachers and other staff at Carmel High School that tell the story of how this production came together. The manifestation of this decision is that the documentary is presented with no narrator. I wanted all information to go straight from those who presented it to the viewer. My hope is that viewers would heed the advice better since it comes directly from the people who are currently practicing in this field, rather than from a relative outsider, namely, me. The teachers who put this particular concert together are the experts, and their knowledge is presented directly from them to the viewer rather than through the eyes of the documentary's producer.

The documentary is divided into two main sections, each providing different sorts of information to the viewer. The first section provides background information about what type of ensemble The Ambassadors is and the format of the concert "An Evening with The Ambassadors." As a show choir, this group incorporates dance, staging, and costumes into its performances in order to provide students with the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in those areas as well as in singing and music in general. Mentioned by the teachers in the video is that this show consists of a first act that contains a variety of music and the second is based on a theme. In my position as observer and assistant, this format made a great deal of sense. The students can be exposed to many styles of music in the first act and delve more deeply into a more focused program in the second. This year, the first act included musical theater, music

from films, barbershop music, swing music, rock & roll, and more; and the second act's New Orleans theme led the students to study jazz, American folk tunes, the region's history, and allowed them to become more aware of the recent devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. The chronological sequence of the show's production is also explored in the first section of the video, beginning with the beginnings of costume volunteers arriving to begin sewing, the planning stages of set design and construction, and music selection all the way through the final week of rehearsal leading up to the performance.

The final segment of this video gives the opportunity for the viewers to get advice directly from the directors at Carmel High School. After seeing how this particular concert is put together, the viewer can get some ideas as to how to approach a similar performance in a different setting, with different resources. As the director of the film, I was lucky to get such advice directly and in even more depth than is presented in the video itself (though more is addressed in this statement than in the video), simply due to fact that the camera can not be everywhere at all times. It is hoped that the decision making processes shown in this video, as well as the advice direct from these practicing teachers to the viewers, can help young and aspiring music teachers as much as it did its producer.

Overall, the production of this event, and the video that followed it, gave me a wonderful opportunity to focus intently on the production issues and bring them to light for others. I hope that viewers of the documentary "An Evening with The Ambassadors" can glean some insights into such an event.